

Matthew 21:23-32 (NRSV)

When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

This seems like a time of decisions. We are asked to decide on a presidential candidate and on candidates for other elective offices. We are asked to decide on a \$700 billion dollar bailout of the economy. We are asked to make all kinds of decisions and while they all seem important, it's hard to know whether we're going to make the right decision or not.

The chief priests and the elders need to make a decision in today's Gospel reading and they clearly don't want to. They need to decide whether they are going to become disciples of this charismatic preacher who is teaching in the temple, or whether they are going to oppose him. They don't know what to do and he's not making it easy for them.

It may be helpful to put today's reading into context. The day before the events described in today's reading, Jesus had entered Jerusalem, to the cheers of the crowd. He had gone to the temple, driven out the people who were buying and selling there and he healed the blind and the lame who came to him. The children cry out to him, "Hosanna to the Son of David," and the chief priests and scribes realize they have a problem on their hands. Who is this loose cannon and where does he fit? Order in Jerusalem is always precarious and there are big crowds coming for the Passover celebration. The Romans have been restraining themselves and allowing the Judeans limited self-rule, but at the first sign of trouble, the Romans will land on Jerusalem with both feet. And this Jesus looks like trouble.

So today is day 2 of Jesus' stay in Jerusalem and the chief priests and elders come to him and ask him, "By what authority are you doing these things and who gave you this authority?" It's possible that they're trying to trick him into a blasphemous declaration of his own authority, but he isn't going to make it that easy. They're going to have to decide.

Jesus is careful in his reply. I'll tell you, he says, if you answer my question. "Did the baptism of John come from heaven or from people?" Note that he's not talking about John's authority but rather the power of his baptizing. The issue isn't whether the chief priests and elders are going to listen to John but rather whether they will listen to God.

But they don't get it. They probably never seriously thought of John as doing God's work. Maybe they thought they had a monopoly on speaking for God and doing God's work, maybe they'd stopped believing that God was still active and vital in the world. In any case, they're more afraid of the people than they are of God.

So they come off with a fairly lame declaration – “We don't know.” We can't say, we can't decide, we need more information, we need authorization. We're just not sure.

Now, it is easy enough to take cheap shots at the chief priests and elders until we realize how much like them we are. Jesus tells the story of two sons, the Yes and No boys. Both are asked to work in the vineyard, and one says “Yes” but doesn't go, while the second says “No” but does go. One doesn't say the right words but does the right thing. The other says the right words, but does nothing. Who does the father's will?

The chief priests and elders know the answer – the son who goes to work in the vineyard. We know the answer, too. But that doesn't mean we always live like we know the answer.

Sometimes, I confess, I worry that we spend a lot of effort and worry at saying the right words, but that we wind up not *doing* the right things. Because, just as he comes to the chief priests and the elders, Jesus comes to us and demands a decision, not on what words to say, but on how we will live. This is not to say that words are unimportant, but just that you can get all the words right and still not live as God intends.

Now, later on today I'm going to be talking with the confirmands about worship. And I worry that I'm going to sound like the chief priests, wanting to make sure that the confirmands get all the words right. Because I do want them to get the words right.

I want them to understand that reverent, joyful worship is important.

But I also want them to understand that there is more to a life of discipleship. We've been talking about discipleship here at Saint Nicholas, that the love of God is fundamental, that it's necessary but not sufficient for a life of discipleship. We talk about *four* things – loving God, loving others, teaching and learning and serving the world, and that growing as disciples is helped by a balanced diet of worship, fellowship, learning and service.

It's ironic, I suppose, that Jesus understood the life of discipleship better than his followers did. What does Paul say in Phillipians? "Though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave ... he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death -- even death on a cross." God in Christ understood how people can live well and tried to teach us by word and example. We've been trying to learn ever since.

I've mentioned that some of us have been meeting in a small discipleship groups. We have a book of lessons we follow, but really, mostly what we do is catch up on each others' lives, ask each other questions on things we're confused about and talk about what we're trying to do and how we're trying to live.

One of the purposes of these groups is to encourage a kind of accountability, trying to live the way God wants us to live, not just to say the right words but to live according to those words. We're not perfect, far from it, but it's helpful to have occasions and friends to talk with about what makes a life of faith difficult and what makes it a little easier. What I know is that even though the people who are involved in these groups have busy lives, none of the groups has stopped meeting once they've gotten started.

In the next couple of weeks we'll be having an adult forum to talk about how to begin a discipleship group. Now, you may not be ready to join one of these groups yet. But let me suggest that you try the following thought experiment. Sometime in the next couple of days, take a piece of paper and make four columns. At the top of the first column, write "Love God." At the top of the second, write "Love others." Third, "Teach and learn." Fourth, "Serve the world." And then in each column write down the things you do under that heading, acts of worship, acts of love, of teaching and learning, acts of service. For the first column, you get a free entry because, after all, here you are at worship. How about the other columns? I'm going to bet that lots of you will have entries in each of the columns, because I know you and I know lots of you are trying hard to live lives of discipleship. The real key is to ask, "What else do you wish you were doing?" What else does God want you to be doing? What else do you see that needs doing?

Because, yes, this is a time of decisions. And there are no more important decisions for us than the decisions about how we will live. And yes, we want to get the words right. But we want to get our lives right, too. And in Christ we are freed to do just that.

Amen.